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Betico Croes–outstanding Aruban political leader–dies in Holland

ORANJESTAD — Flags in front of many Aruba homes today flew at half-mast upon the news that long-time Aruban political leader Gilberto Francois (Betico) Croes, 48, had died in Holland.

Reports from Utrecht said Croes, in a coma since January 1, died quietly in a hospital there at approximately 2 a.m. Aruba time today.

Ironically, he had been transferred to the Utrecht facility, in hopes of improving his recovery chances, from a medical center in another Dutch city only Monday.

Croes, accepted by all as the greatest political leader in the history of the island, went into a coma as a result of an auto accident near his native Santa Cruz late on New Year's Eve, 1985. No one was with him in the car which was demolished after smashing into a utility pole and a precise cause of the accident has never been established.

After several days' hospitalization in Aruba, Croes was removed to a Miami, Florida, hospital, thence to institutions in the U.S. state of Illinois, where he was to spend several months prior to being taken to Holland in the summer.

He never recovered from the coma.

Early years

Born in Sta. Cruz, January 25, 1938, the man who would eventually lead the island in attaining separation from the Netherlands Antilles confederation was regarded by his parents and others as studious and a willing worker.

After three years of high school, he went to Holland in pursuit of teaching credentials. While there, he associated with various social groups relating to the welfare of Antilleans.

His Dutch degree was in teaching but history proved one of his favorite subjects.

An avid student of world history, he also absorbed a formidable body of Dutch and Antillean history. In Holland, too, he got together a group of Antillean students in a socio-politico organization, in a demonstration of his fledgling trait of leadership.

Returning to Aruba, he was to become headmaster of the main school in Santa Cruz and is remembered for giving extra lessons on his own time to slow learners. His hobbies in this period were playing musical instruments and participating in sports.

Political beginnings

By 1967, Croes had become active in organized politics and his name appeared as a candidate for election on the year's list of the People's Party of Aruba (A.V.P.).

An at once popular candidate, he won a seat in government in the election and was shortly appointed one of the island Commissioners, a rank he held until 1970.

From his government position he was able to generate better school conditions for much of the island and he was credited with obtaining the first traveling library for children residing in remote districts. He also won approval for a modern sports hall built in Santa Cruz, Aruba's only such facility to this day.

Founding of M.E.P.

While he rose steadily in the rank and file of A.V.P. Party, Croes saw fit in February 1971 to establish the Peoples' Electoral Movement (M.E.P.) Party, and, relentlessly preaching a separatism from the other Antilles islands, and particularly Curacao, he quickly built up a core of followers.

Those first years, M.E.P. sat in opposition to ruling P.P.A. Party, but by 1975 M.E.P. had become the ruling party, with P.P.A. and A.V.P. in minority roles. M.E.P.'s rapid growth was attributed almost solely to the dedication and charisma of "Betico," as Croes came affectionately to be called.

His party was to rule Aruba for ten years (1975-1985), and, on January 1st of this year, the official separation which M.E.P. adherents sought was granted, leaving Aruba a distinct separate entity in the Royal Dutch Kingdom, apart from the other Antilles islands.

Long before the official separation came, Croes' government had instituted an Aruban national anthem and an Aruba flag accepted by world accrediting bodies. Both symbols would become important in convincing Arubans and outside world alike that the separation was necessary to the future welfare of the island.

The flag and anthem were adopted on the island March 18, 1976, and March 18 (Anthem and Flag Day) is now one of the Aruba community's most cherished annual holidays.

Political decline

Croes, however, was not to take part in the January 1st and prior separation celebrations.

In addition to the accident which plunged him into a coma, M.E.P. Party was beaten convincingly in mid-1985 elections which saw the reins of government pass over to an A.V.P. Party-led coalition of P.P.A. and two other, new, parties.

In the voting, Croes had won more votes than any other single candidate. But it was still less than he had totaled in other elections and singlehandedly he could not stav off the challengers.

In 1984, the leader ha earned the emnity of membei of the business community an many lay voters for his insis ence in bringing the late Mau rice Bishop of Grenada an other Socialist International leaders to speak at an officia Aruban function.

Protest parades and publi warnings to the nonce, Croe adamantly received the con munist leader with warr abrazos and reserved the mai spot on the speakers' platforn for him.

He was also criticized fc his 1985 acceptance of the ir famous "ocho punto dos," an emergency tax of 8.2 percent slapped on all Aruban wage-earners and still in effect today.

The tax had been an arguing point of the Dutch Shell refinery in Curacao's conditions under which they would continue to operate the facility. When Antilles Prime Minister Maria Liberia-Peters seized upon the idea as a good thing for all the other Antilles islands as well, St. Maarten's and the other islands' leaders rejected the would-be tax, threatening even cessation

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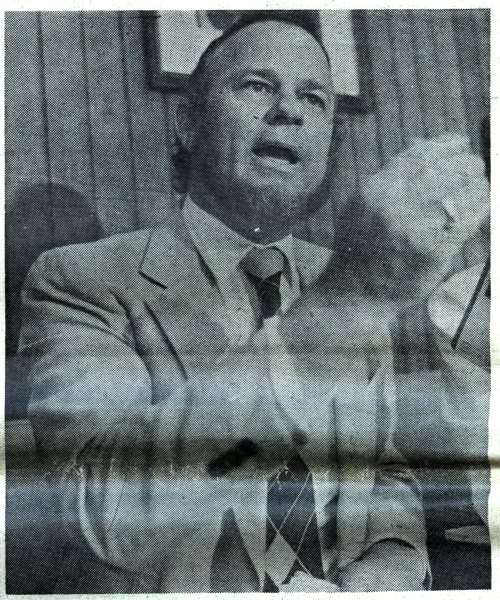

BETICO CROES

Betico Croes

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from the Antilles if it were made law.

Croes embraced the tax, publically extolled its virtues, and the controversial penalty was quietly imposed on Aruba during a weekend.

"Betico, Betico!"

Despite his party's defeat at the polls, Aruban continue to revere Croes and recount his accomplishments with pride.

Even those who voted against him remember without rancor the rallies at which literally thousands of Aruban voices would scream "Betico, Betico!" They were the visible evidence of the arrival of the island's first true leader, one whose strength and popularity quite possibly will never be matched.

Betico mass

A REQUIEM mass for Betico Croes will be held tomorrow evening in Amsterdam at Christuskoning Church.

While the body of Croes is expected to be shipped to Aruba shortly, plans and dates of the funeral here have yet to be decided.